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Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Exemption(s): _____ MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Declassify: ☐ In Part ☒ In Full☐ Classify as _____ ☐ Extend as _____ ☐ Downgrade to _____

Date _____ Declassify on _____ Reason _____

DATE: December 7, 1976

SUBJECT: Conversation with Regional Representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Robert Muller, Regional Representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees

Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

Ms. Yvonne Thayer, Political Officer

PLACE: UN Offices

COPIES TO: AMB, DCM, ARA-Mr. Bray

Mr. Muller, a Swiss, represents the UNHCR in all of Latin America, including Mexico. He has been in Argentina 14 months.

Mr. Muller began by explaining the historical background of the refugee situation, particularly the influx of Chileans into Argentina following the fall of the Allende government in 1973. As Argentina does not recognize South Americans as refugees (having signed the 1951 UN Convention on refugees with a geographical reservation excluding the American hemisphere), the status of the Chileans, Paraguayans, Bolivians and Uruguayans who have sought exile in Argentina has always been unclear. During the Peronist government, the exile-refugees were largely left alone but were eyed with suspicion by Argentine authorities and most never regularized their status. Following the military takeover in March 1976, refugee groups began to be harassed by unidentified elements--presumably including members of the security forces--abducted, tortured, detained, threatened, and, in some cases, assassinated. Their plight led to the UN High Commissioner's appeal for resettlement opportunities outside Argentina. Of the original 14,000 mandated refugees, approximately 2,000 have been resettled outside the country. UNHCR estimates another 2,000 have left on their own. For the 10,000 still under UN protection, some 1,200-1,500 offers of resettlement remain. (Canada will take another 500 persons; the UK 70; the U. S. 200 cases--up to 600 persons; France and Switzerland have no quotas and will continue to take urgent cases).

More importantly, Muller indicated that the military government has acknowledged finally that it has a "refugee problem" and has reversed its earlier

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hostile attitude toward the UNHCR. Relations with government officials have improved and the government is now cooperating in order to move refugees out of the country.

Harassment of refugees has virtually ceased since August.

In September, the Interior Ministry issued a decree asking illegal aliens (refugees) to register with immigration officials. The Ministry has told UNHCR that it will investigate the persons registered and prepare a list of those who will be allowed to regularize their status in Argentina and those who will not. Persons in the latter group will be given UNHCR priority for resettlement abroad. Muller does not know when the list will be ready but is pressing the Interior Ministry.

Muller said that most of the refugees have not engaged in political activities while in Argentina. The one possible exception were certain groups of Uruguayans who, he believes, may have participated in a propaganda effort against the Uruguayan government, although he said he does not believe they were terrorists. Some 40 Uruguayans disappeared from their homes in Buenos Aires in July and September. Several of them later turned up in the hands of authorities in Uruguay who claimed they had been arrested in Uruguay after feigning their abduction in Argentina. Muller denied the Uruguayan police version but said witnesses in Argentina would be fearful to testify against it. He also said that UNHCR had information that three Chileans arrested in Argentina later appeared in Chilean custody, despite GOA assertions that it would not forceably repatriate refugees. UNHCR officially protested in one of the cases.

Viewing the Argentine situation in general, Muller said he is pessimistic, although not so much for the refugees as for the Argentine people. He said he believes the rapidly deteriorating economic situation is likely to further exacerbate labor unrest and cause widespread discontent which is likely to be met with a move to a more hard-line, repressive government. The human rights problem, Muller said, is far greater for the Argentine people at this point and the solution for them is more difficult.

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